

Background

The NASA Ombuds Program has been in place for over 3 and 1/2 years. It was established in January 2004 in response to a recommendation of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board. Its purpose is to provide NASA employees and other NASA Center residents an additional avenue of communication to confidentially and informally raise concerns they perceive as having an impact on safety, organizational performance, or mission success without fear of retribution. The Ombuds function is an informal resource that complements existing formal resources such as the Human Resources Management Division, the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Office, the Office of General Counsel's Ethics Program, the Office of Security and Program Protection, and the Office of Safety and Mission Assurance.

NASA Policy Directive (NPD) 2025.1, NASA Ombuds Program, documents the program's policy and direction. In addition to the principles of confidentiality and informality, all of our Ombuds emphasize independence and neutrality, and follow the International Ombudsman Association's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

The NASA Ombuds Program is led by Ms. Olga Dominguez, Assistant Administrator for Infrastructure and Administration, Office of Institutions and Management. All Centers, Headquarters, and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory have established Ombuds Programs and most of them have both an Ombuds and an alternate Ombuds available to the Center's workforce.

Why establish a NASA Ombuds function?

In addition to providing an additional communication pathway for employees to seek resolution of problems and concerns, the Ombuds Office has the potential to help NASA:

- Reduce safety risk by providing a confidential place to raise concerns.
- Reduce time and cost of resolving conflict.
- Reduce costs associated with error and fraud.
- Promote trust and an ethical work environment.
- Eliminate barriers to an engaged and productive workforce.
- Provide one more resource to ensure people have a place to be heard.

Research into other organizations that have Ombuds programs found that employees observe or experience actions that they know are inappropriate but have chosen not to do anything about it. A recent Ethics Resource Center Study found that 22% of the employees in the study reported that they had observed misconduct in their organizations and did not report it.

Why did they choose not to report the incident? Of the 22% who did not report:

- 70% thought no action would be taken.
- 57% feared their report would not be kept confidential.
- 41% feared retaliation.
- 16% said they did not know who to contact.

The Ombuds function helps eliminate the concerns about confidentiality and retribution and ensures that concerns get a response.

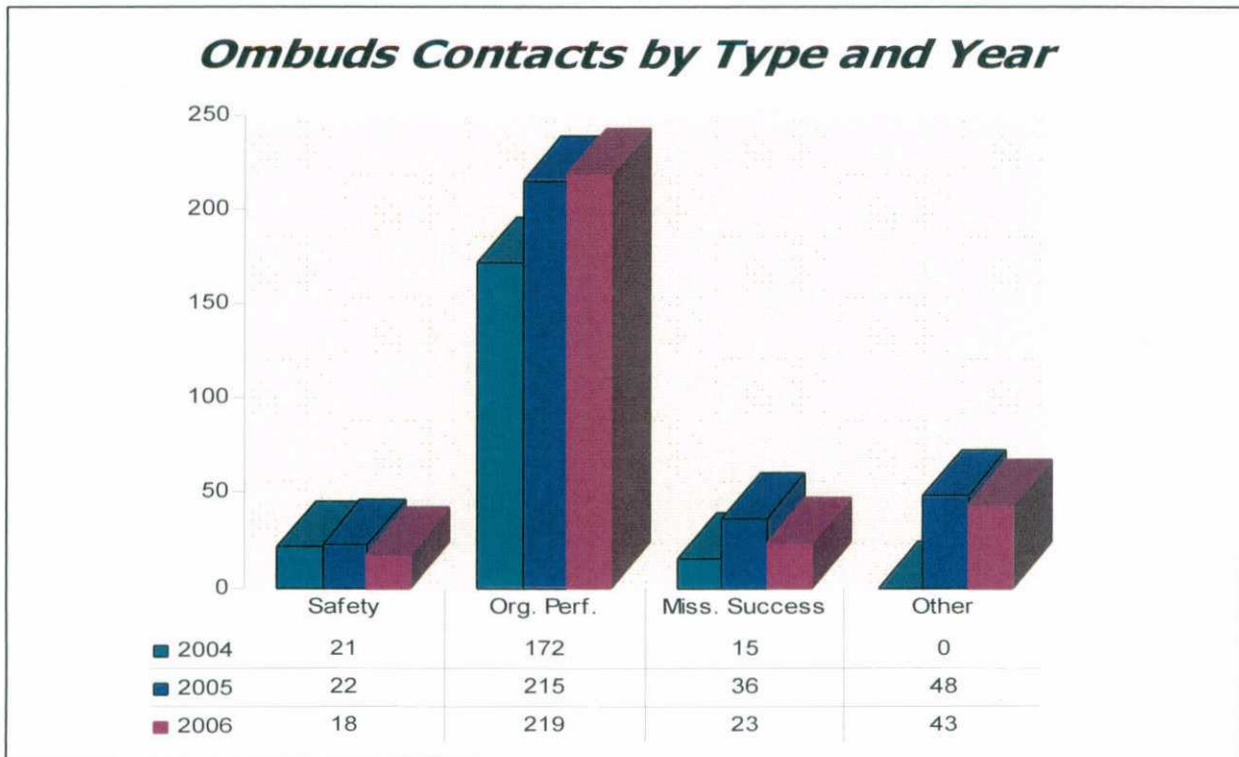
Ombuds Organizational Structure

Today, each Center has an Ombuds, and in most cases, an Alternate Ombuds. Ms. Olga Dominguez, Assistant Administrator for Infrastructure and Administration, and her Deputy, Jeffrey Parker, provide oversight and management of the program. Each Center Ombuds (including the Ombuds at Headquarters) has a dual reporting relationship to their Center Director which ensures that the Ombuds is informed about Center priorities, and allows the Ombuds easy access to raise major trends and issues. The Ombuds does not share specific information that would reveal “visitors” identities without direct permission of the “visitor.”

Note: Anyone who seeks the advice of an Ombuds is considered a “visitor” because of the confidential, informal, independent, and neutral nature of the guidance provided, as opposed to the “client” or “customer” relationships of more formal programs.

Highlights of 2006 and 2007 (to date)

Over 900 people have contacted Center Ombuds since the program’s inception (through June 2007). The Center Ombuds were contacted 303 times in 2006. This is a 5.6 percent decrease in visitors from 2005 but a 45 % increase over 2004 totals. Considering all Centers, between one-tenth of a percent and 4 percent of the Centers’ populations chose to use an Ombuds in 2006. The case count for 2007 at mid-year reflects a pace about 5% over 2006.



Final contact information for 2007 will be available at the end of the calendar year.

Ombuds key accomplishments Agencywide for 2006 and 2007 (through June) included:

- Resolving several individual concerns related to perceived poor treatment, which helped to retain productive employees and potentially avoiding litigation.
- Raising to senior management, issues of inattentive and ineffective leadership behavior.
- Helping to ensure the organization holds leaders accountable for providing respectful treatment of employees and contractors and that appropriate consequences were implemented.
- Securing senior leadership response to a potential safety issues resulting in elimination of problems.
- Identifying and transitioning new Ombuds to ensure the continuity of the program.

Note: It is important to understand that the Ombuds program is confidential and informal, so many of the accomplishments listed above (and those that are not mentioned above), are purposely vague or generic to protect the identity of the visitors.

Awareness Activities

Unlike most Ombuds programs at colleges and universities, private companies, and some other Federal Agencies, NASA's Ombuds program does not employ full-time Ombuds, except at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. NASA's program generally requires the Ombuds to balance the Ombuds responsibilities with other duties; however, the program has still been successful. The Ombuds Program Lead monitors Ombuds activities at the Centers to ensure the program continues to provide the level of service for which it was intended, and to determine if full-time appointments are warranted.

There is currently no formal evaluation of the Ombuds effectiveness at the Centers, primarily because of the informality of their work with visitors. Even so, we have collected some of the most effective practices at the Centers and Headquarters to ensure that employees are aware of the program:

- Utilizing email distribution to communicate the existence of the Ombuds program including when and how to use the program.
- Creating informational brochures at nine Centers which are distributed to employees and contractors.
- Creating Ombuds program websites at seven Centers.
- Meeting regularly with senior managers to update them on Center specific trends.
- Making presentations to new employee and contractor groups explaining the program and sharing the types of issues that can be brought forward.
- Writing and placing articles about the Ombuds program in Center publications.
- Participating in Center wide events to increase visibility of the Ombuds function.
- Securing a confidential, welcoming location to meet their visitors (some Centers).

Professional Development

NASA's policy is to select senior-level employees as Ombuds and alternate Ombuds, who are separate from management or organizational processes and who supervise only a minimal number of employees. Each Ombuds must complete basic Ombuds training as provided by the International Ombudsman Association either before or within six months of their appointment, and undertake, on at least an annual basis, training intended to develop and expand their Ombuds skills. In addition, the Program Lead sponsors an annual meeting for Ombuds to discuss issues, concerns, and future plans. Most Ombuds also attend the Annual Conference of the International Ombudsman Association which provides an excellent forum for learning about best practices all over the world. NASA Ombuds also participate in Dispute Resolution, Ethics, Equal Employment Opportunity, and other training offered at their Centers.

Plans

Future program plans are focused primarily on awareness activities and strengthening the rapport among Ombuds NASAwide. Here are some of the things we plan to do in the coming months and beyond:

- Create and distribute an Agency website for the Ombuds Program, including links to other resources that can be used for issue resolution.
- Extend the reach of Center Ombuds by finding opportunities to present to various employee and contractor groups.
- Ensure that all Ombuds have a confidential location to meet with visitors.
- Improve the quality of communication between and among Ombuds through the use of teleconferences, ViTS, and face-to-face meetings.
- Improve the data gathering process so that more accurate information is captured on the demographics of visitors and Ombuds conflict resolution processes.
- Continue to emphasize and encourage transition and professional development plan for those serving in the Ombuds function.

Contact Information

For more information about the NASA Ombuds Program, please contact one of the following Ombuds:

Ombuds	Center	Telephone	E-mail Address
Bruce Anderson	MSFC	256-544-1901	bruce.h.anderson@nasa.gov
Ralph Anderson	JSC	281-483-1272	ralph.v.anderson@nasa.gov
Albion Bowers,	DFRC	661-276-3716	albion.h.bowers@nasa.gov
John Boyd	ARC	650-604-5222	john.w.boyd@nasa.gov
Geoffrey Briggs	ARC	650-604-0218	geoffrey.a.briggs@nasa.gov
Hortense Burt	KSC	321-867-8768	hortense.b.burt@nasa.gov
Kristie Dunbar	ARC	605-604-5103	kristie.l.dunbar@nasa.gov

NASA Ombuds Program 2006/2007 Report

Ombuds	Center	Telephone	E-mail Address
Sunil Dutta	GRC	216-433-8844	sunil.dutta-1@nasa.gov
Linda Godwin	JSC	281-244-8802	linda.m.godwin@nasa.gov
Wesley Goodman	LARC	757-864-5725	wes.goodman@nasa.gov
Michael Gorn	DFRC	661-276-2355	michael.h.gorn@nasa.gov
Michael Ho	ARC	650-604-2327	Michael.C.Ho-1@nasa.gov
Nicholas Kepics	LARC	757-864-3159	nicholas.a.kepics@nasa.gov
Barron Musick	MSFC	256-544-1002	barry.musick@nasa.gov
Carl Poleskey	HQ	202-358-0971	carl.poleskey-1@nasa.gov
Lewis Redding	JPL	818-354-7045	lewis.a.redding@nasa.gov
Kirk Seablom	GRC	216-433-5593	Kirk.d.seablom@nasa.gov
James Thompson	KSC	312-867-7482	james.v.thompson@nasa.gov
Karen Vander	SSC	228-688-3054	karen.l.vander@nasa.gov
Lawrence Watson	GSFC	301-286-9078	lawrence.f.watson@nasa.gov
Gail Williams	GSFC	301-286-0159	gail.s.williams@nasa.gov

Note: If you are seeking assistance in resolving a problem, do not contact an Ombuds via e-mail, since confidentiality cannot be assured.